

[REDACTED]
Washington DC 20036
February 9, 1992

C-Span Update
Viewer Mail

ATTN: "Booknotes" interviewer of March 1, Robert Massie, author of
Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War.

Dear Sir:

That C-Span will interview the author of Dreadnought is a fine notice of the quality of your programming, as I note in your Update--

It so happens that I have been a close student of the subject and period to which the book is dedicated for over 40 years-- since the summer of 1946, in fact, after my army war service, when an exceptionally informative biography of Bernhard von Bülow, published in 1909, by the then-future premier of France, André Tardieu (Le Prince de Bülow, Calmann-Lévy, Paris) attracted my attention in a used bookstore near the White House. Before then, I had been a casual reader of la belle époque. Sometime afterward, I purchased the four volumes of von Bülow's memoirs published in English in the early 1930's following his death in 1929, and have re-read them several times since then, along with other literature of the period.

I've long since given up trying to contact one of your programs by phone, but in any event, you yourself are the one to inquire of Mr. Massie a few questions regarding his extremely superficial downgrading of Bülow's career as foreign minister of Germany from 1897 to 1900, and chancellor for the years following until late 1909. Tardieu, his contemporary biographer, and at the time a deputy of the French Chamber of Deputies, at that, a future strong premier, with every reason to be hostile to Bülow, gives him the highest praise possible for their day. Not without a critical eye toward the Moroccan crisis of 1905, and Bülow's tendency as a trained lawyer to concentrate on immediate problems at some expense to the future-- but, as, nevertheless, an outstanding statesman and diplomat of the highest order, credibility and integrity. And, as an orator, perhaps equalled in his day, but not surpassed anywhere.

Massie accuses Bülow of having been a sycophant and toady of Kaiser Wilhelm. Tardieu's words contradict that impression-- "He possessed, in effect, in the most honorable sense of the word, the qualities of the courtesan which Bismarck lacked"-- and he cites the same of no less than Cardinal Richelieu's difficulties with royalty. Note the superlative quality of that comparison. Massie quotes no less than the Kaiser, whom Bülow's memoirs attacked unmercifully, to try to discredit him. Massie gives the impression of having read those memoirs-- but he most certainly did not examine those volumes carefully; or, in fact, as was observed in the Washington Post review of Dreadnought, devote any comparable attention to German affairs as he does the British, as one might expect. (May I note that Massie refers in a number of places to the Kaiser's hunting lodge at "Romintern"-- instead of "Rominten." And, to the politician Heydebrand, as "Heyderbrand.") (P.S., to clarify: Rominten is the correct name.)

Bülow laid responsibility for the Great War directly at the feet of Germany-- at the very time in the early 1930's when German scholars and politicians were denying it most effectively with the assistance of American and British "revisionist" historians-- and criticized strongly German professors and others. There is no doubt in my mind that Massie took their versions of Bülow's career unfairly.

With my best regards, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Addendum:

Le Prince de Bülow, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1909, by André Tardieu; of whom D.W. Borgan wrote in his France Under the Republic, 1870-1939, that he was one of Clémenceau's few useful subordinates during the Great War, and then "heir of Clémenceau," and premier, 1928-1931, etc.-- hardly a pro-German! p. 29-- 4th ed.--

"... Il possédait, en effet, dans le sens le plus honorable du mot, des qualités de courtisan qui manquaient à Bismarck. C'est Richelieu qui disait que nulle conquête n'avait été pour lui plus malaisée que celle des "quatre pieds carrés du cabinet royale." M. de Bülow a connu les difficultés de cette conquête et l'on trouve dans les discours mêmes qu'il a prononcés pour couvrir l'Empereur la trace des peines qu'elle lui a coûtées. Sa souplesse lui permettait de céder, sa ténacité de reprendre d'avantage."

Memoirs of Prince von Bülow, v. 1, From Secretary of State to Imperial

Chancellor, 1997-1903, trans. from the German, Little, Brown, 1931-- the reader has to go no farther in the text than pp. 15-16, to find--

"... With the advent of Bethmann, the leading position in the Empire fell to a man who knew nothing of foreign affairs and who, unfortunately, altogether disappointed those who hoped that he would gradually feel his way along and grow to an understanding of them. And when Kiderlen also vanished from the scene to be replaced by Von Jagow, who was as small in body as he was in mind, our Foreign Office became more and more a bureaucratic playground for mediocrities where the work that was done became more and more inadequate and where, in the end, hardly a single political intellect was left. Thus the Foreign Office of 1914 was the incubator in which the evil egg of the ultimatum to Serbia was hatched. It was here that nearly all the errors through which we entered the war and lost the war were committed."

Bülow, again and again, repeats the thrust and theme of that last sentence, throughout his memoirs. With it, the German enemies he made became legion.

Of the Kaiser, open the volumes at random, to find such statements as--

"... His Majesty with the obstinacy of an enfant terrible brought up the matter again at table, to the obvious discomfort of the Tsar ... " (v. 1, p. 667)

"... It was his misfortune that his naïveté as well as his superficiality and, above all, his childish vanity caused him to take appearance for reality and to try to stamp it as reality."-- v. 1, p. 514, and etcetera, etcetera.

And yet, Massie quotes the Kaiser to downgrade Bülow.

Massie also states that Bülow chose Bethmann-Hollweg to be his successor, which was the publicized version at the time, 1909, and repeated in good faith by Tardieu. In his memoirs Bülow categorically denies any such notion, that he suggested several other choices, but the Kaiser was in no mood to listen-- and Bülow must certainly be believed; for Wilhelm, by nature, would have refused any suggestion of Bülow's, for by then his distrust of Bülow had become an obsession. Massie clearly did not read, or if he did, consider seriously, the concluding pages of Volume 2 of Bülow's memoirs.

I hate to be so critical. But as Senior Book Reviewer for the U.S. Information Agency's book programs for 25 years, I always had to hold fast to the saying-- Never allow anyone else's ignorance, however vast, overcome one's own knowledge, however small--

And, by the way, the truly definitive version of Massie's subject is: The Great Naval Race, by Peter Padfield, McKay, 1974. Absolutely superlative.